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The Turks and the Future of the Near East

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THE Eastern Question, which is primarily involved in any discussion regarding the future of the Turks, may be called the ghost that stalks across the hall at Paris in which the representatives of the great nations are at present assembled for deliberation at a crisis in the world's history; and there is only one of those nations that can address the ghost and truthfully say,

“Thou canst not say I did it,
Shake not thy gory locks at me.”

That nation is the United States. Let us be fair even to the Turk, and recognize at the outset that but for the diplomatic game played by all the Great Powers of Europe in the past—England, France, Germany, Russia, Italy, without exception—the ghost would have been laid years ago. Acting entirely from motives of expediency, instead of basing their diplomatic policy on principle, when at the close of the eighteenth century the definite decline of Turkey brought the Eastern Question to an acute stage, the European Powers alternately supported the “Sick Man of Europe” or administered a dose in the hope of hastening his demise. The famous remark of Lord Salisbury after the Crimean War, in which he apologized—as it were—for England's taking what turned out to be the wrong side, by declaring that she had unfortunately backed the wrong horse, is characteristic of the policy that was pursued in regard to Turkey by all the Powers. It was a question not of the right side, but of the winning side. Rivalry between England and France dictated the policy of both nations towards the Eastern Question, just as Russia's ambitions in the East engendered the attitude both of the Powers that favored Russia and of those that opposed her. Germany, directly responsible for the latest phase of the Eastern Question, which was the root of the present war, was merely playing the same game that had previously been played alternately by Russia, England and France. Each endeavored to secure an

advantage for herself through the decline of Turkish prestige, without much reference to what was equitable towards the people within the Turkish Empire.

It is, therefore, the severest condemnation of the old style European diplomacy in the East—and which, it is to be feared, is not quite dead—that we should be confronted today by an appalling situation in Asia Minor, Mesopotamia and Arabia; that in the twentieth century we should witness such a tragedy as that of Armenia; that in a part of the world where a high order of civilization flourished thousands of years ago, large portions of the population should today be sunk in the depths of ignorance. Such occurrences and conditions are not to be explained as due solely to Turkish misrule—disastrous as this misrule has been—nor can they be entirely accounted for through Turkey's neglect to provide any proper system of education for the peoples within her domain. In part, at least, the conditions in Asia Minor and in adjacent countries are the result of the kind of diplomatic policy followed by European Powers concerned for their own interests and actuated by motives of rivalry, or fear of a predominating influence of one power over a portion or the whole of the Near East. Rivalries among European Powers, abetted by intrigues on the part of others, succeeded just a year before the outbreak of the Great War in breaking up the Balkan League, which was the creation of the eminent Greek statesman, Venizelos, and which came near to settling the Turkish Question in 1912. Had the league been maintained intact, Germany's plans for the domination of the Near East would have been foiled, with Servia and Bulgaria blocking the road to Bagdad; and who knows but that the war of 1914–1918, which Germany risked in order to carry out her plans, might have been averted?

All that, however, is past history. What of the future? What can be done for a section of the world which has suffered from an inefficient government, from corruption, from extortion, from neglect and, not least of all, from exploitation on the part of the European Powers and their representatives? Will we avail ourselves of the opportunity presented by the end of the war for solving the question of Turkey and Asia Minor on the basis of principle instead of on diplomatic expediency?

EARLY HISTORY OF ASIA MINOR

A significant feature in the history of Asia Minor has been the part played by that region as the great passageway from the more remote East of migratory hordes driven by pressure from the rear. Now the natural trend of these hordes is towards the south and not northwards. The Turks, who obtained a strong hold in Asia Minor in the eleventh century, would have been confined to extending themselves within this region and to branching out southwards, had it not been for the internal quarrels of the Byzantine Empire, which led one of the rulers in 1341 to call upon the Turks to assist him in the struggle against a rival. Geographic conditions in Asia Minor are not favorable towards the formation of a great central empire. The country is cut up by mountain ranges, mostly running north and south. It is separated by a formidable mountain range from what is known as the "fertile crescent," the strip along the Mediterranean which is the bridge connecting the African continent with Asia, and which as it leaves the Mediterranean forms a crescent, the other end of which runs along the Euphrates to the Persian Gulf. This "fertile crescent," the seat of an advanced civilization thousands of years ago, with the Euphrates Valley at the one end and the Nile Valley at the other, has always been a magnet attracting the northern hordes that passed from some eastern region into Asia Minor. But in Asia Minor itself no empire was ever formed that succeeded in welding the various nationalities of the region into a definite and permanent union. We must here also be fair to the Turk, and recognize that his failure to establish a strong empire in Asia Minor was not due entirely to his inefficiency, but in part to natural conditions, which even Greece and Rome failed to overcome. Even the old Hittites, a most warlike people, who ruled in Asia Minor about fifteen hundred years before this era, never had complete control of it. Moreover, the mixed population of Asia Minor added another barrier to the natural one, for an attempt to weld a heterogeneous population into a larger nationalistic or political unit lay beyond the political horizon of antiquity. It is distinctly a modern and more particularly a western point of view that prompts us to make the endeavor—as is done on so large a scale in this country—of uniting a variety of nationalities and of various races into a political unit. Even a small island like

Great Britain includes three nationalities, English, Scotch and Welsh, each distinct in origin, but together forming a great nation. In ancient times such a process was impossible, and the East has always been behind the West in that respect. Despite the great contributions of the ancient and of the later East to civilization, politically it has always lagged. For this reason it is hardly presumable that within any conceivable period a movement for the political combination of the different ethnic elements—not to speak of differences of religion—in Asia Minor and the contiguous countries, Syria, Palestine, Mesopotamia and Arabia, would have any chance of success. Perhaps in the far distant future, when under western influences more advanced political ideas make their way through the East, a federation of the nationalities of Asia Minor may be possible, but for the present we must deal with conditions as they have developed historically in that region. This suggests a division into a number of states according to geographical and ethnic boundaries.

MESOPOTAMIA

Beginning with countries contiguous to Asia Minor it must, of course, be evident that Mesopotamia can be expected to flourish only if organized as a separate state under the tutelage either of an international commission or of a western mandatory power. The Euphrates Valley, with its northern extension along the banks of the Tigris up to the point to which the Tigris is navigable, has always formed an independent state along natural geographical lines. To this day the population in Mesopotamia, to use the conventional though somewhat inaccurate designation, is much more homogeneous than the rest of Asia Minor. To a large extent the population represents the descendants of the old Babylonians and Assyrians, though with considerable mixtures, in the course of ages, of other peoples, notably of Persians, Turks and Syrians, not to speak of large Christian settlements composed of those belonging to Indo-European races. English influence has been pronounced in Mesopotamia, particularly in the southern portion, ever since the end of the eighteenth century. A good deal of educational work has already been done among the population through missionary efforts in Bagdad, Mosul and elsewhere. On the whole, conditions are much more stable in Mesopotamia

(except for the outlying marshy districts in the south) than, for example, they are in Arabia. During the years just preceding the outbreak of the war, English engineers, under the leadership of Sir William Willcocks,¹ were active in building the first of a great series of contemplated barrages, the cost of which would in time have been more than repaid by the increased yield of the land. The first of these barrages was actually completed in December, 1913, and ready for operation; and no doubt English enterprise will see to it that the work, which will transform a neglected country into a veritable paradise that marked it in ancient times, will be carried on under peaceful and more auspicious conditions. With the establishment of an orderly government, with the introduction of a system of education and with the regulation of the finances of the country, we may expect Mesopotamia to play an important part in the resuscitation of the East under western tutelage.

ARABIA

Coming next to Arabia, one gathers the impression that that vast region is at present very much in the same condition in which it was prior to the appearance of the Prophet Mohammed in the seventh century—broken up into districts under the control of tribes, without much semblance of unity among them. Since the outbreak of the war, a portion of Arabia, which contains the two sacred cities, Mecca and Medina, has made itself independent; and the authority of the Sherif (or, as he is called in European parlance, “king”) of Hedjaz has been recognized by England. It may be that by once more transferring the headship of the Moslem Church from Constantinople to Mecca the political union of Arabia will be brought about. Such a union, however, will demand a strong personality, and if such a one should arise there would also be the possible danger of outbursts of Islamic fanatics, seized with the idea—as were the followers of Mohammed—of spreading Islam by force of arms. The religious question, which can hardly be separated from the rise of a large empire in Arabia, requires delicate handling. Even at the present time, despite the existence of a railroad up to Medina—and which

¹ Sir William Willcocks, *Irrigation of Mesopotamia* (London, 1911). The full plan calls for six barrages at a total cost of 29 million Turkish liras.

eventually is to reach Mecca—a non-Moslem cannot enter either of the sacred cities under pain of death. This of itself shows how difficult the task will be of bringing Arabia under the influence of modern and western ideas. For the present, nothing further can be done than to aid the Sherif or the King of Hedjaz to establish order in the country controlled by him, and to make sure of the establishment of a decent government in southern Arabia or Yemen which, it is fair to assume, will not be willing to recognize the supremacy of any ruler of the Hedjaz.

PALESTINE AND SYRIA

In Palestine and Syria the situation is much simpler. Conditions are more favorable in both these countries for a rapid recovery from misrule and neglect, because they have come during the past half century more directly under western influences than other parts of Asia Minor, in part through settlements of Europeans—Christians and Jews—attracted to the country because of its historical association or for other reasons, and in part through educational efforts in which our own country has taken an important and distinguished part. In the success of the Protestant college at Beirut, of Robert College of Constantinople and the schools established in various parts of Palestine and Syria, by English, American and French missionaries—to which we must add the activities of the Alliance Israelite Universelle in organizing schools for Jewish children in various parts of Palestine—one sees the beginning of a *genuine* solution of the Eastern Question. Such educational efforts interpreted aright the real meaning of the decline of the Turkish Empire as affording an opportunity for western lands to bring about a resuscitation of the East.²

WESTERN INFLUENCE

The country is there—Palestine, Syria, Mesopotamia—as it was thousands of years ago. The physical conditions are the same, the people even, to a large extent, are the descendants of those who produced a high order of civilization millenniums ago. All that is needed to bring about a resuscitation is to reproduce the favorable conditions that existed in the “fertile crescent” in

² I have endeavored to set this idea forth in greater detail in my book *The War and the Bagdad Railway*, pages 138–152.

antiquity. In Egypt through a broad liberal policy, involving the education of the people, England has changed an utterly neglected and ruined country into a great center of modern activity, with western influences and western methods dominating the life of the people. This may be taken as an index of the changes for the better that will be wrought in Palestine and Syria once those countries are more completely brought under the sway of western ideas of education, western methods of government, western sanitation, and western commercial and industrial activity.

This brings me to my main point, to wit: That the resuscitation of the East, which alone would furnish a satisfactory solution of the Turkish Question in Asia Minor and adjacent countries, cannot be accomplished without the direct support of the western powers—precisely as Egypt, Algiers and Tunis have been so vastly benefited through the two great western powers, Great Britain and France. What applies to Mesopotamia, Arabia, Palestine and Syria is also applicable to Armenia, which will without question be organized as an independent state through the efforts of the Peace Conference. Armenia, too, needs to be brought under western influences. The intelligence of the Armenian population is such that by their own initiative they promoted educational efforts among the population, even while they were under Turkish dominion. It will, therefore, not be long before, with the support of the West, an orderly form of government will be established, a proper system of education introduced, and steps taken for the building of necessary roads and railroads, and for otherwise improving the internal conditions. Armenia, we may feel assured, will welcome western influence, whatever shape that influence may take.

THE RECONSTITUTION OF TURKEY

Assuming that the reorganization of an Armenian state will cover the eastern part of Asia Minor, running from the Black Sea just east of Samsun, diagonally in a southwestern direction with an outlet on the Mediterranean, the part to the west up to the Aegean should properly be set aside for the reconstitution of Turkey in Asia Minor. The Turks belong to this region, in which they had been settled for almost a millennium before they crossed over into Europe. Here in Asia Minor they established, under the

Selyuk branch, a government which prior to the coming of the Ottoman Turks, had made notable contributions to civilization, more particularly in the domain of architecture and the decorative arts. But the Turks themselves, as the history of Turkey since the revolution of 1908 has shown, need to be placed, for a time at least, under western tutelage. The young Turkish party has bitterly disappointed the high hopes that were set in it. It lent itself to political intrigues of an even more mischievous character than those which characterized the régime of Abdul Hamid. The young Turkish party gave a helping hand to Germany's sinister scheme for the political dominion of the Near East. They were willing to see Turkey reduced to the rôle of a mere pawn in the hands of Imperial Germany. It is generally said that a people has the government that it deserves. An exception must be made in the case of the Turks, who have always been better than their government. The testimony of those who have lived for a long time in Turkey and who know the Turk best bears witness to the fact that, when not stirred up to fanaticism by a crafty and intriguing government, the Turk shows many good traits. He has always suffered by having a government that was dishonest as well as inefficient. The peace of the world would again be in danger if we allowed the Turks in Asia Minor to fall under the influence of crafty and scheming leaders. For self-protection as well as for the betterment of the Turk, we must place Asia Minor under western tutelage.

THE TUTELAGE OF THE EAST

Now, how should this tutelage over Turkey in Asia Minor, over Armenia, over Palestine, Syria, Mesopotamia and Arabia be exercised? My own feeling, based upon many years of study of the ancient and modern Orient, and which I have endeavored to set forth in various publications, is decidedly in favor of a tutelage of the East under the guise of international commissions. I cannot help feeling that things would be safer and that economic, political and educational development in Asia Minor and in adjacent countries would be more normal if it were possible to place these countries under the protection of the League of Nations, with international commissions established in each of them as the directing hand in constructing democratic forms of government, in

educating the people to self-government, in regulating finances and in promoting economic growth. The disposition, however, of those to whose hands we have entrusted the regulation of international affairs at the Peace Conference appears to be in favor of handing over each one of the countries involved to a single power entrusted by the league with mandatory authority.³ If this view should finally prevail there are only three countries among which the mandatory power for the Near East can be distributed—England, France and the United States—for Italy is hardly prepared to undertake at present a work of such character. It would be admittedly unfortunate both for England as well as for the world if she alone were to be the mandatory power for the entire Near East. If she accepts the commission for Mesopotamia, Arabia and Palestine, she will have her hands completely filled. France, it is generally believed, will not care to extend her mandatory power beyond Syria, in which she has for the past sixty years and more taken a special interest and where she has done so much to improve conditions and to safeguard the lives of the population.

THE RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE UNITED STATES

There remains, then, the question whether the United States should accept the mandatory power for Armenia and for the reconstituted Turkish state in Asia Minor. I exclude Constantinople for there appears to be a general consensus of opinion that it should be placed under the control, for the present at least, of an international commission, somewhat similar to the International Danube Commission, established by the Peace Conference of 1856. I venture to think that if the offer is made to this country to undertake the task of political guardianship over a portion of the Near East it will be impossible for us to refuse. And that for two reasons. In the first place, we are pledged in a measure by the valuable constructive work that we have done in the domain of education for the countries of the Near East to continue such

³ It is to be hoped that an exception will at all events be made in the case of the Bagdad Railway, the affairs of which ought not to be placed in the hands of any *single* western power. The enterprise should be internationalized with a board of directors composed of representatives of various countries. Had such an organization been effected at the inception of the railway, the pan-Germanic scheme would never have been developed. See further on this point, Jastrow, *The War and the Bagdad Railway*, page 146.

beneficent activities. This kind of activity indicates the attitude of America towards the East; and it should be a source of justifiable pride for us to realize that the European powers have perceived the necessity of *aiding* the East to recover some of her lost prestige as the policy that must be substituted for mere political power and commercial exploitation. There is no reason why that which has been done so successfully by Americans unofficially should not be carried on officially under the direct auspices of our government.

Furthermore, it is impossible to suppose that the world can pass through such an upheaval as the last war and leave any great nation like ours in the same position of isolation from world politics as we lived in before this war. We are forced by circumstances beyond our control to participate in the momentous problems at present engaging the attention of the conference at Paris. We were drawn into the war after it had been going on for over two years and a half. In case of another international conflict it is almost a certainty that we will again be involved. We must, therefore, from motives of self-protection participate in the present deliberations to solve international problems, with which we as a nation have no direct concern, both because of our part in the war that has come to an end and because in the event of another conflict we certainly will want to have something to say at the time of its *breaking out*. We must, therefore, be willing to take a share of responsibility for conditions in the Near East, because the East has been and will continue to be one of the danger zones. Prior to the war of 1914-1918, there were two other international conflicts, the Crimean War of 1854 and the Russo-Turkish War of 1876-1877, in which the European Powers were all directly or indirectly involved and which broke out over the Eastern Question.

One can well understand the hesitation of many thoughtful people in this country at the prospect of our becoming involved in the problems of the East. But the answer to all such objections must be that we cannot shirk the opportunity of aiding in the resuscitation of the East, if such an opportunity comes to us. It would, to be sure, be no gain to this country to undertake the mandatory direction for Armenia and western Asia Minor; and it is possible that we may also be asked to undertake the guardian-

ship of Constantinople. It would be, however, a great opportunity for service, for continuing on a larger scale and in an official capacity what we began more than half a century ago by establishing educational institutions in the East through missionary and other private efforts. If there is such a thing as destiny in the fortunes of a people, events at present would seem to point to our undertaking a part of the work of the resuscitation of the East. New conditions always involve new duties. If the conference should decide on the plan of mandatory powers for the countries of the Near East, instead of international commissions which, let me emphasize once more, appears to me to be the far better and safer plan, we must be willing to take our share and to render further service in the work of progress and enlightenment to which this country has been committed ever since its birth.